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ABSTRACT

This report is the result of taped interviews with 115 Alaskan teenage women who have dropped out of "regular" public school. Two results of the study stand out: first, the majority of the students wanted a diploma, but nonetheless felt compelled to drop out; second (the reason most girls gave for dropping out): no one cared. However, most of the young people expressed appreciation and enthusiasm for the education and support they were receiving from the alternative schools to which many of these girls turned after they dropped out. Such schools address four major factors which caused the girls to drop out in the first place: (1) abuse and neglect; (2) stereotyping and discrimination; (3) low self-esteem; and (4) isolation and alienation. As a consequence of this research, the report provides three sets of recommendations, addressed respectively to the state legislature, to the Department of Education and the University of Alaska, and to the school districts of Alaska. In summary, the report emphasizes the importance of having adults act as advocates for a child, keeping track of her academic progress, her social relationships, and her health. It also calls for a more personal, flexible school environment that encourages such attention. Interview questions are appended and references are included. (TE)

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SPEAK OUT
ABOUT DROPPING OUT

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THE ALASKA WOMEN'S COMMISSION

February 1990

YOUNG WOMEN OF ALASKA

SPEAK OUT

ABOUT DROPPING OUT

THE ALASKA WOMEN'S COMMISSION
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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, "YOUNG WOMEN OF ALASKA SPEAK OUT," is the result of taped interviews of 115 teens who have dropped out of "regular" public school. Two assumptions underlie this report: one, that we already know enough about dropping out to know it constitutes a very serious problem in Alaska as well as the rest of the nation, and two, the "experts" on this problem include the students themselves as well as adults who are trying to assist them.

The national drop-out rate is approximately 33%. Although absolute figures for Alaska are impossible to obtain at this time, it is generally accepted that our drop-out rate is at least as high as the national average. Young women represent almost half of the drop-out population. Even without the final figures, we know that female drop-outs represent a serious problem.

The unique aspect of this study is that it affords the reader an opportunity to hear the thoughts and feelings of young women who have gone through the experience of failing in school or having school/parents/teachers fail them and have dropped out as a result. Both the causes and solutions presented in this report are based primarily on interviews with the young women. Through their candid and thoughtful comments, we get a better understanding of the immense emotional burdens they carry in their struggle to survive in school.

Two results of the study stand out: first, the overwhelming majority of the students we interviewed wanted a diploma. They did not want to drop out. When asked what messages they wanted to pass on to other girls considering dropping out, they strongly urged them to stay in school.

The second noteworthy result of the study was the reason most girls gave for dropping out: no one cared.

The fact that school districts, other institutions, and individuals are making serious efforts toward finding solutions to the drop-out problem is proof that our communities do care. In fact, the heroes of this report are the alternative schools throughout the state to which many of these girls turned when they dropped out. Most of the young people interviewed are presently attending an alternative school and they expressed appreciation and enthusiasm for the education and support they are receiving.

These schools succeed where regular public schools fail precisely because they are designed to care, to care about students facing major challenges in their lives. Such schools address the four major factors which, according to the interviews, caused the girls to drop out in the first place:

A. Abuse and Neglect
B. Stereotyping /Discrimination
C. Low Self-Esteem
D. Isolation/Alienation.

Excellence in our schools must be measured, at least in part, by the number of high-risk youth we are able to attract and hold in our schools.

We can no longer afford to spend time arguing over who is at fault. The debate over whether drop-out prevention is the responsibility of the school or of parents is becoming a moot issue. All of our community resources and institutions must work together if these young people are to be successful, and schools have a vital role to play.

We know how to help these students. "We know what works in terms of effective drop-out prevention programs for girls, indeed for all students. What works is having adults (parents, teachers, counselors, community mentors, nurses) act as advocates for a child, keeping track of her academic progress, her social relationships, and her health. We need a more personal, flexible school environment that encourages such attention. For young women at risk, this means actors in a school setting who are aware of their particular risk factors and who have time to address them." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ALASKA WOMEN'S COMMISSION

The Alaska Women's Commission makes the following recommendations for addressing the female drop-out problem in Alaska:

TO THE LEGISLATURE:

1. Provide seed money to study secondary school restructuring and to incorporate successful aspects and structures of alternative programs into public schools.

2. Support Chapter 18 funding for DOE to increase training, monitoring of school districts and development of curriculum materials.

3. Mandate life skills, health, and personal safety curricula in schools.

4. Provide funding for programs for youth-at-risk, including counseling for victims of rape and sexual abuse.

5. Support alternative high schools in regional centers and increased funding for adult basic education.

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA:

1. Integrate training in sex and race equity, age and economic status discrimination into the courses of future teachers and counselors.

2. Insure that all aspects of the policies and regulations specific to Chapter 18 are implemented at the University of Alaska and in Alaska school systems.

3. Reassess relevancy of course work in schools so that students are better prepared for work and post-secondary education and are involved in their own education.

TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF ALASKA:

1. Actively seek new and innovative ways to incorporate the best elements of alternative schools into existing public schools. Seek ways to establish school-within-school alternatives and to restructure schools.

2. Implement and expand the state's sex and race equity and anti-discrimination policies and regulations, and develop comprehensive in-service training programs that strive to change teacher attitudes and encourage the use of curriculum materials that reflect these policies.

3. Develop ways to reduce the ratio of students to teachers for at least part of each day. Institute team teaching in junior high schools.

4. Provide training to teachers in how to reach out and respond to students with special emotional needs and/or problems.

5. Provide child care in or close to schools. In urban communities develop special comprehensive programs for teen parents.

6. Develop and implement life skills, health and personal safety curricula.

7. Create a flexible school environment that accommodates students' individual learning needs and life situations. Provide tutorial programs in schools for students who are falling behind.

8. Provide counseling and related activities (e.g. extracurricular activities such as theatre, art, dance, etc.) to enhance girls' self-esteem. Develop support groups and mentoring programs in schools.

9. Provide parents with information on the educational needs and potential of their teens. Encourage parent involvement and support of their teens in school.

10. Allow for a process of student review of teachers. Initiate less adversarial methods to resolve teacher/student problems. Include a program for peer review of teachers' performances.

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II. BACKGROUND

The Interview Format

A number of state and national studies have been conducted to determine why teens drop out. The Alaska Department of Education is presently gathering statistical information on the statewide drop-out rate, information which will be invaluable in examining geographic, ethnic, economic and gender patterns in the drop-out picture. Such data give us a wealth of information on who drops out and from which areas of the state or sectors within a community they come.

The study summarized in this report is based upon personal interviews with a number of Alaskans most directly involved with the issue of teen drop-outs. The information gathered from the interviews in this study is qualitative rather than quantitative, and is meant to supplement the statistical information and analytical research already being obtained by other research techniques.

The interview method of gathering information is a "participant-observer" research technique. The researcher seeks the thoughts, feelings and opinions of key informants. The intent of this study is to document the feelings and thoughts of young women who have totally dropped out of school as well as those teens in alternatives to "regular" public school. In addition, this report includes information gathered from adults associated with the young women interviewed.

Due to limited resources, the focus of the research was narrowed to young women who have dropped out of regular public school in the Anchorage area. In an effort to assess possible statewide applicability of the information gathered, a sampling of six other communities, both rural and urban, was taken. This report represents a beginning examination of a very complicated statewide issue.

Two groups were interviewed: (1) Young women who have either dropped out of school or are attending an alternative school (2) Adults involved in the education or support of the students interviewed.

115 teens were interviewed in seven communities broken down as follows: Anchorage - 58 interviews; Fairbanks - 31 interviews; Kodiak, Seward, Nome, Hooper Bay and Ketchikan - 26 interviews combined.

Of the 115 young women interviewed, 49% were Caucasian, 34% were Alaska Native or American Indian, 9% were Black, and 8% were other.

The young women were interviewed in small groups, usually consisting of seven or fewer girls. Ten questions were asked of each participant and the responses were tape recorded (questions are included in the appendix).

Ten adults were interviewed, one at a time, and the interview format was more flexible. Adult interviews were conducted in Anchorage, Hooper Bay, Emmonak, and Nome.

It is the belief of the Women's Commission that, by listening to the thinking of teens who have experienced the positive and negative elements of dropping out, we may gain further insight into the human element behind the statistics.

III. WHY YOUNG WOMEN DROP OUT

In the Women's Commission study, the following causative factors were identified as a result of interviews with the young women and the adults.

A. Abuse and Neglect
B. Stereotyping/Discrimination (based on race, age, gender and economic status)
C. Low Self-Esteem
D. Isolation/Alienation.

A national study about drop-outs confirms the centrality of these four factors, although it uses different titles for the same problems. (Michael Leeds and Associates)

Low self-esteem and isolation are almost always present when a child has experienced some level of abuse, neglect and/or discrimination; as a result, abuse and neglect and stereotyping/discrimination are viewed as primary causes of the drop-out problem, and the resultant low self-esteem and isolation/alienation as secondary causes.

All four factors were not directly referred to by every young woman interviewed. In addition, not every young woman experiences the same mix of these factors nor does each person respond to them in the same way. Nonetheless, the above factors accurately describe the main forces propelling young women out of our school doors. If we are to help them remain in or return to school, we must address these key issues.

A. ABUSE AND NEGLECT

> "Probably 90% or more (of young people in SAVE or SEARCH) are victims of something. Incest or rape, some form of abuse, from neglect through the whole gamut of very violent physical abuse. Most are probably victims of verbal abuse. From the very least of just hearing you are no good to hearing all kinds of slanderous, abusive, swearing kinds of remarks...very harsh language, getting programmed about how awful they are. They are often victims of parents who were victims. Some are children of alcoholics, children of drug users."
> Barbara Garrison, Principal, SAVE and SEARCH

> "I think by and large they (young women) are, as a population, more battered, more abused sexually, physically and mentally, and put in the parental role more often than the young men." Larry Huff, Director, SEARCH

> "Child abuse and neglect is defined as 'any act of omission or commission that endangers a child's physical or emotional health or development.' (Michael Leeds and Associates)

Alaska has long held the painful distinction of being a state with very high levels of violence against its young and female populations. Here are some sobering statistics:

- Alaska has the third highest reported rate of child abuse and neglect in the nation. There were 20,000 cases of child abuse and neglect reports received in 1986. (State of Alaska, Dept. of Health and Social Services, Division of Family and Youth Services, 1986 report)

- 53.6 cases of child abuse and neglect occur per every 1,000 children in Alaska. (US. Dept. of Justice, "The Source Book of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1986)

- 26% of the women in Alaska who responded to a survey on domestic violence reported being the victim of violence by a spouse or adult live-in partner at some time in their lives. 10.2% of the women surveyed had been abused in the previous year. At least 13,500 women in Alaska, in the year studied, required medical treatment from a doctor for injuries sustained by abuse. ("Domestic Violence in Alaska, Women's Attitudes and Experiences," University of Alaska, Fairbanks, 1986)

Although the resulting behaviors vary greatly depending on the student and the level and type of abuse, the effect in every case of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse of a girl is to damage the child's feelings of self worth and her sense of belonging in the world.

Child abuse and neglect are a major causative factor contributing to the high levels of female dropouts and problem students in our junior high and high schools. A young woman who has experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse may express her hurt in a number of ways, all of which are detrimental to academic performance in schools. In the classroom she may withdraw and become virtually invisible or she may act out, fight, or find alternative methods to express her anger and pain. In either instance, the eventual result is often yet another drop-out or expulsion statistic.

Even though they were not asked directly about abuse, more than half of the young women interviewed related incidents of some form of emotional abuse, ranging from being ignored by parents to experiencing verbal put downs to emotional neglect. Most teachers and administrators interviewed estimated the percentages of girls suffering from abuse in all categories to be very high. One key informant estimates that at least 90% of the young women in alternative high school/junior high programs have been sexually, physically and/or emotionally abused, while another estimates no less than 70%.

The young women interviewed at McLaughlin Youth Center and Covenant House were more outspoken regarding their experiences and, not surprisingly, almost all had experienced sexual abuse, most had experienced physical abuse and all had suffered some level of emotional abuse. At McLaughlin, where a series of seven group sessions were conducted instead of the one or two at other sites, a level of trust was established which allowed the young women to talk about sexual and physical abuse.

Emotional Abuse and Neglect

Emotional abuse and neglect was a constant theme:

> "I remember hearing that I was dumb, that I didn't know how to do anything, I was stupid. That I am not going to be anything when I get older." 15 year old
>
> "My mom thinks I am dumb. My mom thinks I am worthless." 14 year old

"I thought I was stupid and that my parents couldn't wait to see what kind of house I was going to live in (sarcastic) and couldn't wait to see me working at McDonalds flipping hamburgers, you know..." 15 year old

Physical and Sexual Abuse

Many of the young women described their homes as virtual battle fronts. Yet, clearly, most had learned to minimize the physical abuse they have endured.

"From years one to six, it was basic; I just got abused the first six years of my life. Nothing really, I just got beat for the first six years of my life." 17 year old

"My dad, I can remember that he used to physically abuse me. It wasn't anything really bad like beating the crap out of me or anything, but he would pull my hair and kick me. Then, when I was six years old, well, that is the first I can remember of my grandpa sexually abusing me until I was twelve."17 year old

Other young women recall their episodes of sexual abuse:

"When I was younger and all this stuff, my Aunt's boyfriend, I was 4 years old and he raped me and then like, it like totally messed up my insides you know, I can't even have kids." 15 year old

"I've had like three rapes, they're not in jail, they're, like, still out there." 15 year old

"My brother played a game with me, he said 'oh it's just a game, you know, I need practice for my girlfriend.' I didn't understand what he was doing because when it first started I was like real young and when it finally stopped, which was when I was 12, I finally started understanding what he was doing, you know, because he always said it was a game." 14 year old

Abuse and neglect have equally devastating effects on both our young male and female students. However, the disproportionately high levels of sexual abuse of girls makes this a significantly female problem. If we are going to address the major causative factors for young women dropping out, we must find ways to address their sexual and emotional abuse.

B. STEREOTYPING/DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RACE, AGE, GENDER AND ECONOMIC STATUS

"After a while you get used to it and it doesn't bother you as much. Because when you are younger, and the kids are calling you spic and beaner, you are like, 'well what did I do wrong' type attitude. It doesn't really hit you until you are older. Then that is when you finally realize, hey my skin color is not the same as theirs. I am darker. You have to live with it... it does make you stronger... You don't have the attitude that, 'I can get a job anywhere because I went to this school.' You have to fight your way through the school, fight your way to the top." 16 year old

"When I came here, I was in the 9th grade. In the front of the book it had Afro-American history, but we never studied the front part of the book. We just went on to the next part of that book and I used to wonder how come. I really didn't get an answer." 17 year old

"Just, I guess pray for people who don't understand that everyone is equal and everyone is created the same. If I cut you, and if you cut me, I'm going to bleed. That is what I think." 18 year old

Societal stereotyping and discrimination based on a number of factors over which the girls have no control (race, age, gender, economic status) added weight to the already formidable stresses at work to make them drop out of school.

1. Race

Racial stereotypes took various forms, ranging from assumptions of failure or "troublemaking" by teachers to name calling and snubbing by other students.

"OK, I'm not prejudiced or nothing but I notice a lot of the teachers, white teachers, have something about minorities. I notice that a lot of teachers have prejudice somehow. I notice that a lot of the black kids don't get any attention at all, whatsoever. I guess they (teachers) just think they're wasting their time with the Blacks or Spanish or any minority. A lot of the white kids get attention. You know what I mean." 18 year old

"You know, they got, sounds dumb but, they got the good crayons, you know, we got the bad ones, we got the torn up ones. Same as when I was in kindergarten, we had this class when you were just learning about Jack jumping over the candlestick, well we didn't get to jump over the candlestick, you know, so it's just little things like that can add up to big things, you know, in life." 13 year old

2. Age

According to the young women, discrimination based on age generally took the form of disrespect from adults, a tendency to be treated as a category (e.g. "all 15 year olds act like this...") rather than as an individual, and an assumption that the young women are dealing with issues common to young people in stable, nurturing families rather than very serious, "adult" problems, such as raising their own children or coping with violence.

"Well, my teachers are like, 'we've been through it all, we know what we are talking about, you are lower'." 15 year old

"They treated you like you were lower than them because they had a status symbol, 'teacher.' They acted like we were to act like little peasants." 15 year old

"Either they treat you like you are some little kid or immature." 15 year old

3. Gender

Abuse

Although abuse was discussed in the section on Abuse and Neglect, it is worth mentioning that women -- including young women -- are disproportionately the victims of sexual abuse. Such abuse is one particularly destructive expression of gender discrimination.

Teacher Interaction and Socialization

Gender stereotypes often translated into less attention and encouragement from adults in families and at school. In a number of studies, teacher responses to students have been found to favor male academic development and independence. "Girls are more likely to be invisible members of the classroom. Teachers talk to them less, provide them with fewer directions, counsel them less, and give them fewer rewards." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

In addition, numerous studies have indicated that the stereotypical female role into which most girls are socialized strongly motivates them towards developing interpersonal skills, while discouraging them from choices that further career development. Such conditioning often results in a lack of financial security in a world in which most women now work.

> "Teachers kind of look more towards the guy to 'Oh don't drop out.' Teachers like the guys... they usually didn't like the girls to talk out in class." 17 year old
>
> "I think if I would have been a guy the teachers would have given me more attention. They would have helped me more. " 13 year old
>
> "Guys get more attention because of sports. I noticed that the guys on the school teams, the teachers help him, you know, push him through this class." 16 year old
>
> "I was pressed to act like a little girl, to sit while wearing a dress, and to make sure I didn't say the wrong things to the wrong people. I think if I was a boy it would have been more carefree. I don't think I would have had as many teenage problems if I were a boy."
> 17 year old
>
> "I would have gone to mechanics and seen how things work. I would probably fit more in my field instead of going away so I would probably have finished school here."
> 17 year old

Teen Pregnancy

One area in which the girls clearly felt they had been treated unequally in school was in the area of pregnancy. They overwhelmingly felt that young women are labeled and penalized while young men get off more or less "scot free."

For the approximately 40 percent of females who drop out of school for reasons related to pregnancy and marriage, their dilemma can be symptomatic of low self-esteem, low academic achievement, and a lack of life options in general.

"In order for a teen to successfully delay pregnancy, she must see opportunities in her future -- education, employment, a career -- worth planning and preparing for." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

Increasing life options means increasing basic skills, knowledge, and self-esteem, exposure to a variety of adult roles and role models, and basic opportunities for education, community participation and employment.

4. Economic Status

Discrimination based on economic status displayed itself primarily in the non-acceptance of poorer students by the various cliques in the schools and by judgments about their looks and clothing. However, the young women also felt that they had experienced economic discrimination from teachers.

"They never give certain people a chance, they categorize you. Like the way you dress, 'oh, that's got to be in or out, that's prep, well their parents are rich, we will treat them good.' I don't know, it's not cool." 15 year old

"They look at people, at the way they dress and everything. They don't look at their insides." 15 year old

"Some people don't know how to match, they wear their clothes they have worn a week and they are not as good as anybody else... They got feelings, they have been through so much hell in their life... I get sick of it. (People) are just worried about themselves and nothing else. Maybe somebody else isn't as well off as you are and you should respect that. We are still the same. To me, money has nothing to do with it. I would still be the same caring person if I had a million bucks, and right now I have no money, but I am still the same person." 15 year old

C. LOW SELF-ESTEEM

"Only when young people feel secure, i. e., that their physical and psychological safety and basic needs are met, are they able to develop positive self-esteem." (Michael Leeds and Associates)

As used in this report, the term "low self-esteem" refers to the debilitating effects of negative messages given to young women that they are ugly, stupid, worthless, useless, lazy, only to be used for other peoples' ends, etc. To the degree a young woman believes these messages, she begins to internalize the abuse and tell herself that she is indeed worthless, stupid, fat, and other negative things. The result of internalized self-abuse can range from low academic performance to attempted suicide.

Much social and psychological research indicates that children who are consistently nurtured, loved, and treated with respect and care become young people who generally act intelligently, confidently, cooperatively, and with a sense of their own value and connection to others. Children whose natural sense of curiosity is not interfered with remain avid learners, interested in themselves and the world around them.

Messages from parents or parent substitutes and from the community and culture at large positively or negatively affect a child's sense of personal power, security and competence. The very high percentages of mistreated or abused teens in this group suggests that many young women live in circumstances which threaten their feelings of security and worth in the family and in the world.

Even if a child's family is supportive, the effects of stereotyping and discrimination with regards to age, race, gender and/or economic status can have a serious impact on her sense of self-worth.

Negative Reinforcement of Low Self-Esteem In School

For most of the young women interviewed, feelings of low self-esteem originated from mistreatment at home. Experiences in school (with other students, teachers and counselors) often reinforced the girls' negative images of themselves and set up a vicious cycle in which their self-esteem spiraled downward to the point where they had few defenses against other self-destructive behaviors (e.g., addictions, suicidal behavior, pregnancy) and dropping out looked like the only viable option.

> "If you got a question wrong, they say to you 'what's wrong with you, aren't you paying attention to what we are saying?' They say it in front of everybody and (you) feel a little stupid, you feel like, hide in the corner. They don't ask you if you need help. They make a statement to make it look like you aren't paying attention. That you are just dumb or goofing off." 16 year old

> "The teachers up here seemed to only pick certain kids that are worth it. If they don't think you have a chance, they just let you go. They don't really care, they don't really help you, know what I mean? So I can just sit back here, fail, and drop out. They had certain little pupils they paid a lot of attention to'and the ones they didn't think were going to make it, they just set them all in the back and they could do what they want." 14 year old

> "One time when I went back into school, to the 9th grade, I had a math teacher and I came in and he was explaining it to me and I still didn't quite understand and he said 'well, if you can't understand this then you don't belong in this grade.' And that's not something that a kid should hear from a teacher when they're trying to learn something." 17 year old

> "Also, like if you don't understand, they automatically say, 'well why weren't you listening?' They make a point of it to the class, 'well, hey, she wasn't listening, she doesn't get it.' You know." 15 year old

Positive Reinforcement of Self-Esteem

Those individuals and incidents that served to increase or reinforce a girl's positive self-image were rare gems in these girls' experiences; they remembered them with great warmth and in vivid detail.

> (Did anyone at school act as a support to you?) "My English teacher Ms. Arinson...I mean it's like majorly lame, but I couldn't do (the English) because I couldn't understand it. Ms. Arinson was really supportive because I like writing so she took my writing as my English... I would have to say Mr. Holland and Ms. Arinson. The two teachers that really kept me in school as long as I stayed. When they weren't around I just said f--- it and dropped out." 17 year old

"In the 7th grade, I had a wonderful teacher. He helped me a lot. I was a rebellious kid. He told me if I completed a certain writing assignment I could make a C in his class. I got maybe half way done and I took it up to him and said I would just take a D. He told me I could do better than a D and threw my paper in the trash. I guess that impacted me, it had a lot of reinforcement for me. He told me I could do better." 17 year old

In addition to teachers, other individuals in the school system occasionally played a vital role:

"There is this security guard in our school and everybody calls her 'mom.' She is like friends with the stoners, it's what you would call them. She comes outside, she makes sure everybody is okay, she is there for you, you know, I mean she listens to what you have to say, she doesn't cut you off and tell you to shut up that you don't know what you're talking about, she hears you out. I mean if she could be a teacher she would be the ideal teacher." 15 year old

Teen Pregnancy And Low Self-Esteem

As mentioned earlier in this report, teen pregnancy is increasingly being viewed as a result of low self-esteem and a lack of life options on the part of young women. "Without the incentive of a promising future, many girls who are experiencing frustration and failure at school view parenthood as a chance to excel in an area remote from academics." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

"Then I got pregnant two months after I got back to town and it was funny because everyone thought I dropped out of school because I was pregnant... I really hope they do something about school systems so that they recognize learning defects before kids get so discouraged..." 17 year old

"At public school (when you get pregnant) they just look at you like, 'We don't care.' People here (alternative school) would understand and they would try to help you, but other schools, they just feel like, 'you're sick'." 16 year old

A number of school districts in Alaska have developed alternative programs specifically for pregnant and parenting teens. These programs are important since the special needs of these students have been ignored for so long. But it is also important that we address the underlying causes for pregnancy, such as sexual abuse, low self-esteem and limited life options. Approximately 40% of the young women who drop out do so for reasons related to pregnancy. If we are to address this problem we must develop programs to help young women contradict the negative messages they have received and begin to believe in themselves and their futures.

D. ISOLATION/ALIENATION

"Bonding is the feeling of being connected to others. The flip side of bonding is alienation. A lack of a sense of belonging is one of the most powerful factors contributing to at-risk young." (Michael Leeds and Associates)

> "I think the kids that wind up here are alone basically. I think, if there is a family structure, they are alone or isolated in that family structure. They are kids who are alone in the school system... At least within themselves they experience loneliness, and they experience isolation regardless of who is around them." Barbara Garrison, Principal, SAVE I and SEARCH

Most of the students, administrators and teachers interviewed emphasized that young women who drop out of public school struggle deeply with a sense of being alone in the world, with little social connection to either their peers or adults. The young women interviewed related numerous events in which feelings of isolation within the school system were clearly identified as the reason staying in school felt impossible. Most often, alienation was experienced as not feeling accepted by either teachers or students or just feeling that they didn't belong anywhere.

Many of these young women have had no one they felt they could turn to, either at home or in school, for even minimal emotional support and guidance. They routinely expressed feelings of isolation within their families as well as at school. Most of the interviewees expressed very strong wishes that they had been able to remain in "regular" school and intimated that even a little support from either home or school would have made the difference in allowing them to stay.

The question "Was there anyone at home or in school who was a support to you?" usually generated the same response:

"No one. I can't think of one person."

Isolation at Home

> "It is within the family context that one first learns (or fails to learn) the values, rules, attitudes and skills necessary for functioning in society, acquires a sense of self worth, and forms the primary human bonds which, to a considerable extent, determine the nature and quality of subsequent social relations." (Michael Leeds and Associates)

Most of the girls interviewed had lived or are currently living in families unable to provide them with a sense of clear values, their own value or their ability to connect well with other people on the social level. One of the most common reasons that families do not function well is that the parents themselves never received adequate parenting. The results of generations of poor parenting vary from inconsistent discipline to outright violence and abuse.

> "The majority of the students I work with come from broken or dysfunctional homes...they do not have a nurturing environment or their parents have not set expectations for them. They do not have positive values instilled in them...that it is important for them to have goals, that it is important to have goals. Parents (of the students I see) by and large have a great deal of apathy in terms of their child's existence." Larry Huff, Director, SEARCH

> "I see them (my parents) sometimes. But I don't know, I think in a couple of years if I were to see them in a store, they would probably just walk on by. Just one of those kind of things." 17 year old

> "I drifted in my family. I was the drifter. I wasn't real, I was there physically, but mentally I wasn't there. I was always in my room by myself listening to my radio, or writing, or sorting

out my room, or rearranging it, or if my parents were gone, I would just always be on the phone all the time. I was never really there. So then at age 15, I started f----- up. I said, 'I can't handle this.' I didn't like my parents anymore, I never liked my parents. I hate living in families, I would just rather be by myself. So that was when I started running away..." 16 year old

Isolation at School

"Lack of meaningful involvement in school activities and decision-making, large depersonalized school environments, and student perceptions of irrelevant content and inflexible programming alienate students and discourage feelings of responsibility and respect for school property and personnel." (Michael Leeds and Associates)

Few of the teens interviewed felt any connection whatsoever to non-academic activities at school. If they had any attachment to the school at all it was to the other students or to the occasional teacher who held out a hand to them. They were not active in any extra-curricular activities and perceived the school to be a separate, disinterested institution that bore little relation to their real lives.

In almost every interview the young women expressed a feeling of invisibility or aloneness within the schools they attended. Other teens didn't accept them into establish cliques, and, since they were not the best or even average academic performers, they were ignored (or felt ignored) by their teachers.

"Their sense of their experience is that they are alone, just not a part of anything. In a regular school they stand out like a sore thumb. Either they look different or they disappear." Barbara Garrison

"Students used to give me problems and that used to hurt me so much and at the same time I had family problems and I didn't talk to anybody. I kept it inside. From keeping it inside I almost hurt myself (suicide)." Village teen

"The only thing they (the teachers) would say to you is if you did really good at something. So if you screwed up, they didn't care." 15 year old

"At public school, your teacher sometimes will say, 'that's nice.' But it is kind of like your mom. Like when you were a kid and your mom is sitting there reading the paper and you say 'Oh, I got this in school' and you are all excited but your mom just says, 'Yes honey, that is wonderful.' That is how you feel sometimes when you are talking to the teacher. Like, they don't really care about your personal life. Here (at the alternative school) they do." 16 year old

"And a lot of times the math class... I went to my class and I would sit... and put my head down and go to sleep... and when the bell rang I go to lunch... He didn't notice me." Anchorage, 16 year old

"I was crying and the teacher says, 'here's a pass, go see the nurse.' I took the pass and walked out the school, you know. That was kinda cold. They shouldn't be so cold." 18 year old

Change From Elementary School To Junior High

Frequently, the change from elementary school to junior high school constituted the final straw for the young women. The transition from a relatively small school with some kind of structured home base (a teacher and a small group of students) to a huge, seemingly impersonal junior high was the final blow to their already overtaxed resources.

> "Out of 100 students, all but five failed a grade in school. Of those who failed, three quarters or better failed seventh grade. That tells me that they enjoyed the homeyness of an elementary school and had problems moving into junior high and the students confirmed this."
> Lynn Sorenson, Counselor, SEARCH

When interviewed, the girls repeatedly expressed their sense that they had no one to turn to at school. Most of the girls recalled with obvious feeling their last experience of someone actually caring enough about them to notice their difficulties; this person was usually an elementary school teacher who had given them a bit of individual attention or asked them why they were missing so much school.

> "In third grade I skipped all the time. My teacher brought me out in the hall (this was right after my parents got divorced) and she said 'What's going on at home?' and I told her and I started coming back to school everyday 'cause she give me hugs." 18 year old

Junior high/high school experience convinced the girls that no one even noticed that they were dropping further and further behind, let alone cared enough to ask them what obstacles they had to overcome simply to get to school each day. Instead, they often found themselves the recipients of punishment (in the form of lower and lower grades or public humiliation) which only served to weaken an already battered resolve to keep attending school.

> "You know, when you have too many absences, they don't ask you if you are having problems or anything, and even if you are having a problem, it is just that they don't try to help you. They say that they are but they don't. They don't try to help you at all, they just try to get you in trouble. I thought it was too hard to go to a school like that. It was just too hard for me." 18 year old

Feelings of isolation and alienation can lead anywhere from mild depression to hopelessness and even suicide. It is critically important that we find ways to connect with the young women in our schools, to provide for meaningful involvement in school activities and decision-making.

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IV. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

How can the schools make a difference?

The results of our interviews suggest that the problems girls experience outside of school are central to their difficulties in school. The question of how students learn centers on the issue of how they feel about themselves. If a student thinks she is stupid, lazy, no good, worthless, or unworthy of attention, then she is obviously less likely to do well in school. If a student is preoccupied with surviving at home, school may seem like an unnecessary drain on her already burdened life.

Nonetheless, the interviews also revealed that the attitudes and actions of adults in school settings have a profound influence on whether a girl manages to remain in school or gives up and drops out.

The young women interviewed were asked to talk about changes that would make schools work better for people like themselves. Some of their answers addressed attitude changes they would like to see. Others involved changes in structure, additional classes, and/or the development of support systems to assist students in facing challenges in their personal lives.

During the course of the interviews, almost every discussion of public school resulted in enthusiastic comments about the alternative schools the girls were attending. SAVE I, SEARCH, SAVE II, The Adult Learning Center, and McLaughlin received rave reviews from the students. Most of their suggestions for changes in the structures of schools, as well as changes in the attitudes of both teachers and students, came from their experiences at the alternative schools.

Here are the ideas offered by the students and adults interviewed.

A. ATTITUDES

Respect/Care For The Student

Of all the sentiments expressed by the students, by far the strongest and most frequent was the plea for teachers to care about them. The girls wanted to be listened to, to be asked what was wrong, to be treated with care and respect, to be encouraged to learn and helped to do so.

Unbeknownst to most students, of course, many teachers are caught in a kind of "catch-22" of their own. If the number of students and the length of their classes were more manageable, many teachers would, in fact, take the time to relate with students on an individual basis. But, due to limited resources, most teachers are, in effect, trying to do the impossible: increase the level of academic skills among their students while class sizes continue to expand and the percentage of at-risk students continues to grow.

Nonetheless, what seems to work for these at-risk youth (or for any student for that matter) is personal attention.

"We believe philosophically that the best thing we can do is to care about the kid, the whole kid. When the student is freed up to be confident because the teacher has instilled a sense of value or caring, then learning becomes a mystery to explore, and that is when kids are turned on by school." Barbara Garrison, Principal, SAVE II AND SEARCH

Implicit in caring for students is respecting them and treating them as good, intelligent and valuable people. Often, deep-seated prejudice regarding age, sex, economic background or race affect a teacher or administrator's ability to treat a student in a respectful manner. We all deplore prejudice and yet most acts of discrimination are unconscious and unintentional.

Few adults recognize many of their attitudes and behaviors towards young people as discriminatory because children are almost universally treated as less than adults, and because most adults were also treated with disrespect as children and therefore have internalized the "one up/one down" relationship between adults and children as normal.

From the students point of view, the teacher is dismissing them as not worth the trouble. The teacher, in their view, doesn't respect them and yet demands their respect, doesn't care about them as people and yet expects students to care about school.

"Some students or some teachers are so quick to condemn a student, to throw them down to the ground and beat on them. Give them a chance at least give them a chance... Like if you see a student that really screws up, you never know, they might have problems at home and the teacher is not willing to help them work it out. Then what good does that do? That is like pushing the kid out to the streets, and not giving them a chance. But give them a chance and let them know that they are there sometimes if they need them, or if there is somebody else there, or they can give them a number, you know like a private 1-900 line, or something like that. Not just to always be so quick to judge students. Because everyone deserves at least one chance." 15 year old

"I think that teachers should treat their students like human beings and do not disrespect them..." 17 year old

"Teachers should be able to... learn from their students and not only them teaching us. It should be a two-way street, you know." 15 year old

"I just really think, I guess I really feel like love should overpower hate and that... teachers should be a role model." 17 year old

"The teachers should really care, you know, they should have teachers that care about you, not just 'oh, hi, come in, I don't know your name but take this test and I will give you a grade.'" 17 year old

Teacher/Student Training To Eliminate Stereotyping/Discrimination

In Alaska, all teachers receive mandatory training in sex equity and the laws regarding sex and race discrimination as a part of their in-service work. Such training is a potentially powerful and highly positive statement by the school district in support of helping each student achieve her/his full potential. However, most adults interviewed agree that such training is widely viewed as tiresome and is often

only attended because it is mandatory. They feel the training is inadequate to change deep-seated attitudes. It appears that, for many people, prejudice and misinformation were learned so early and are so difficult to root out even with the best of intentions, that extra effort is needed to assist teachers in changing discriminatory attitudes and behavior.

> "Well, first I think that teachers should not be allowed to express their racial feelings. If they don't like, maybe, people, or they don't like black people, they should keep it to themselves..." 16 year old

> "It would help if, like, the teachers got screened before, so you know like they do with cops, screen them so that they're not prejudiced or have these thoughts about abortion 'cause I bet in a classroom where the teacher is preaching about abortion there's a lot of girls who have (had an abortion) and how's that supposed to make someone feel?" 17 year old

Gender Discrimination

Discrimination on the basis of sex is a subtle but active ingredient in why schools fail young women. In order for young women to flourish in school, teachers must acknowledge that gender discrimination exists and actively seek to educate themselves and fellow teachers as well as their students on ways to eliminate this oppression in the classroom. The power to actually achieve change is in the hands of the classroom teacher.

B. STRUCTURES

Alternative Schools And/Or Schools-Within-Schools

Many of the young women and adults interviewed wished to see more schools with structures similar to those of Anchorage's SAVE and SEARCH schools, Adult Basic Education Center, Career Center, and Steller. Sentiments regarding these alternative schools were overwhelmingly positive. Whether the question asked was, "What worked well for you in school?" or "What was hard about school?," eventually the young women in each interview group launched into a long, excited discussion about the merits of the alternative school they were attending. Here are a few of their remarks:

> "I got the best grades I have ever gotten. At this school, I can do 100% better than I do at any other school because they help you more, and they care about you, they talk to you personally, they help you more with your work." 15 year old

> "Like everybody has patience here. Do you know what I mean?... If they know you want to succeed, then they will help you. They will talk to you individually and help you. Give you a chance." 16 year old

> "If you are missing too many days, they talk to you. You know, like 'why, how come you are missing so many days?' It is like they care. They talk to you, 'why, how come, you don't have a ride, family problems or something?' And you tell them and they talk to you. They really want us to do something with our lives." 16 year old

"There (public school) they walk around with a ruler, here they talk to us like we're human, man!" 17 year old

"In here they don't single us out just because... like one kid is one color or richer." 17 year old

There's more done (here). I never got an 'A' in my life 'til I got here. I've never wanted to go to school before this." 18 year old

"Teachers, they communicate with us and interact and get involved instead of being the teacher and us being the students. We're all just a class." 17 year old

"They treat you like you're a human. Sometimes we don't have a class... sometimes we just sit down and talk about personal problems." 16 year old

Special Needs of Pregnant/Parenting Teens

Pregnant and parenting teens have a special need for alternatives to public school. They need a more flexible schedule to accommodate their physical needs as well as special courses in prenatal and infant care. They also need access to social services, day care, and family life education. "To date, however, schools have tended to play a relatively passive role, and generally become involved in establishing special programs for pregnant and parenting teens as a result of some external pressure." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

"I wanted to go back to school but there was just no way I could. They didn't have day cares and sure social services said they would pay for day care but what good was that going to do me? I was nursing and to me I wasn't going to give up nursing to go back to school so they could teach me more foolish things." 17 year old

"It is really encouraging for other women to go to the school where there is other women there with their own children and here is also a teacher who knows your situation and is also a nice person which is willing to sit down and help you..." 16 year old

Lower The Ratio of Students To Teachers

"My fantasy school would be something like this (SAVE). A smaller school... where there are schools divided like two or three schools in each district. Like in the West (High School) area, two or three schools... That would probably be my ideal school, to have a school like this. You don't have 30 students and just one teacher. In here it is like 18 or 20. So they have time for you and it is not as cramped." 16 year old

Most of the young women and adults interviewed believe that schools must be structured so as to allow for much more contact between adults and students. They feel that the ratio of teachers to students must be lowered so teachers can get to know individual students and track their progress emotionally as well as academically.

A report issued by Alaska's Governor's Task Force on Effective Schooling in 1980 concluded that "operating smaller classes for academically needy and younger students appears beneficial." Although

the recommendations that followed focused on devoting attention to "improving instructional methods, rather than altering class size in general," the report also stated that "the evidence is stronger concerning the relationship of class size to various indicators of the quality of the educational environment. Nine of the documents reviewed found better student behavior, higher teacher morale and more effective instructional practices in conjunction with small classes." (The Governor's Task Force)

Following is a summary of reasons given by students and adults in this study for preferring smaller classes:

1. Students have more of an opportunity to get to know one another and build a sense of belonging and cooperation within the learning environment, contradicting feelings of isolation.

2. Teachers can both identify teens who are having academic and/or emotional problems and assist them in finding resources to help them be more successful in class. Success contradicts feelings of low self-esteem.

3. Behavior problems can often be dealt with in the classroom instead of having to send the student away. This further develops a sense of community in the classroom and encourages students to work cooperatively and experience behaviors and consequences together. Teachers retain the prerogative of sending a problem student to the principal, but, with smaller classes, they have more time and attention to devote to each student should they choose to handle the problem within the classroom.

4. In smaller classes, highly effective teaching techniques such as small group discussions and seminars are more likely to occur. If the class is large, the lecture format is more efficient and easier for the teacher to use. This format is the least suitable for the learning style of at-risk youth in general and girls in particular.

> "SEARCH is a better school because it is a small classroom setting. You get more help." 15 year old

> "I like maybe a (smaller class size) thing because the teacher has more time for you... In a small classroom you can get to know everybody else and you know, everybody knows the problems that you have so they can maybe understand, you know." 16 year old

> "There are just too many people, like at Service (High School), there is too many people. They can't keep track. They hardly even know anybody's name and they certainly don't have time to teach you how to do any of your work and if you don't get your work in time you don't get a grade and all that. It's just too hard." 16 year old

Seminars Or Discussion Groups

The learning needs of at-risk female youth are much better served by small, cooperative learning environments which incorporate teaching formats such as seminars or discussion groups. Standard education methods are often incompatible with the girls' cognitive processing and socializing styles. Gender differences in cognitive orientation are a well-documented fact. As the National Association of State Boards of Education study states, "In general, girls learn through cooperation with others, acknowledging each other's ideas, and building upon them to find common meanings. In contrast, boys

are more competitive, working to contribute through differences from their peers." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

Many of the interviewees indicated that they felt girls like themselves would be more successful in programs in which a group works together to solve problems and study issues.

> "There is no motivation at school. I mean at regular schools, there were no discussions. If the teacher says something, you do it. If you don't do it you get kicked out or you get a bad grade or something. Here (SEARCH) you have discussions and stuff like that and the teachers talk to you individually if you need help." 15 year old

> "They explain more things. They go into discussions and that makes it more easier to learn -- explaining, giving you things to do... Most teachers don't do that." 15 year old

Individualized And Competency Based Programs

One aspect of the alternative schools which students repeatedly applauded was the use of individualized learning programs. Whether using a computer-based learning program or a self-paced written program, students were relieved to be able to work at their own rate without the pressure to compete with class members.

Most schools are based on the assumption that all students are to be treated (academically) in the same way, all students learning the same set of skills at the same time and moving on to the next grade level at roughly the same rate. This system treats all students identically despite the fact that girls learn differently than boys and students learn different sets of skills at different rates. As a result, "this pattern continues until students either graduate, or, in the case of some at-risk students, become so discouraged with the system that they drop out." (National Association of State Boards of Education)

The students interviewed in this study clearly favor a system which acknowledges learning differences among young people.

> "I think people should be able to work at their own pace, that would be a lot easier, because like the last class that I had in math, they kept pushing you and everything and if you didn't understand it they treated you like imbeciles. Like 'one plus one is this, do you understand that?' I mean, give me a break." 15 year old

> "You know, people should work at their own pace and not have to deal with all this stuff, I mean it is bad enough to go to school just to get your grades and everything. I mean there is people who comment about how you dress, they put you in categories and everything..." 13 year old

> "It's just like me, learning, it takes me, there is something I just catch on really fast and then there is a lot of things it takes me a while to learn and teachers they just don't have time for you. I don't think I am dumb, I just need more help than some people and they just don't have time for us, so what is the use of my going to school if they don't have time for me?" 15 year old

Life Skills Classes

The girls interviewed often expressed a desire for classes that had more relevance to the challenges and issues they faced in their everyday lives, classes which dealt with "real life" situations and concerns. Their needs ranged from more and earlier options for vocational education to classes on: parenting, coping with dysfunctional families, paying bills and renting, and self-esteem and assertiveness.

> "If we are going to have problems like, you know, the problems that teenagers have now, we need to, you know, they need to start looking at us and start expecting that we do have responsibilities." 16 year old

> "You know, credits are credits you know, That's good to graduate but it's like, it doesn't show you responsibility, doesn't show you things that are going to happen later in life." 17 year old

> "I just think that, like the Career Center, you know, they should have those kind of classes available too (in junior high)." 13 year old

> "If they would have been teaching me things that I need to learn, you know, for everyday life." Ketchikan teen

> "Personal finance... we talk about personal lives. Real meaningful issues." 18 year old

> "I like it here 'cause the teachers make us equal and they're real... In public school I couldn't like... don't touch the computers, they're for the gifted children." 16 year old

C. SUPPORT

Peer And Adult Mentoring Systems

Few of the students interviewed directly expressed a desire for peer and adult mentoring programs, although one group did specifically recommend such a program. Yet the number of statements expressing feelings of isolation suggests that such programs would be readily embraced by at-risk students.

Peer and adult mentoring programs match an at-risk youth with an appropriate adult or peer who then acts as an academic and emotional mentor. They have been highly successful in other school systems and to some extent in the Anchorage School District, although few of the students interviewed had heard of the Anchorage mentoring program. Community support for this program could allow it to expand and become more visible to the students.

> "We have this saying at Dimond (High School) called Natural Helpers, and you know it is where kids can talk to kids, which is so much easier than if you have to go to your counselor who can't even remember your name." 15 year old

Support Groups

A small number of students from wide ranging geographic and cultural backgrounds advised including young women's support groups within the regular school system. The rule of thumb was, if the young woman had experienced such a support group, she advocated for one; if she hadn't, she didn't offer it as a possible solution.

Many of the students directly and indirectly expressed a need to have a place to think with other young women about the issues facing them. They wanted a safe place to have their feelings about what was happening to them without anyone reacting to them in a way which negated or underrated their experiences. They wanted a place where they could think and feel and not be advised, admonished, reported on, psychoanalyzed or discounted. They didn't want the group to assist in problem solving, but rather act as a safe haven in a otherwise sometimes explosive and unsafe world, and a place to obtain reliable and practical information about how to solve the problems facing them.

> "I would have group. School shouldn't be a school just to learn math, science and history. It should be a place where you can go for help too, you know. There are kids in school that have family problems that need help, you know, and there should always be a place where you can go to find out about things... they also should have maybe stuff on self-esteem things." 15 year old

> "There are people that need help and the school should be there to help." 15 year old

SUMMARY

In todays economy, education is critical to future earning capacity. In the past 20 years we have seen a major increase in both the number of single parent families headed by women and the number of women and children in poverty. Given these trends and the continuing disparity in wage levels between men and women, we must work now to make the necessary changes to ensure that young women in Alaska will be able to support themselves and, if necessary, their families.

The solutions presented here are based on the thinking of the young women interviewed for this report. Their suggestions are valuable but incomplete. More research in rural communities is necessary if we are to fill in the picture of why young women drop out. However, we have enough information to take action. The support of the legislature, Department of Education, school districts, and teachers is needed.

If we listen to what is true for these young women and use this information in conjunction with reports produced by educators, we can start implementing solutions now.

V. MESSAGES FROM YOUNG WOMEN WHO HAVE DROPPED OUT TO OTHER YOUNG WOMEN

"Without that diploma you really can't do nothing now." Anchorage, 13 year old

"It's not really that great (if you're not in school). You wake up and sit around all day and be bored." Anchorage, 13 year old

"When you don't go to school you got to get a job because you got to be doing something productive in your life, you know, or else if you don't start right away you're going to end up in the gutter or on 4th Avenue. And it isn't that great being young and having to work and usually when you start having to work you're not going to go back and get your GED or diploma." Anchorage, 18 year old

"It really means a lot to me to have on the cap and gown and people be proud of you, for people to be proud of yourself with a diploma in your hand..." Anchorage, 15 year old

"You know it really scares me 'cause I dropped out of school almost every year, and I want something with my life, you know. I don't want to be, you know, in jail..." Anchorage, 15 year old

"... I took up with this guy that I have been with since eighth grade and when I got pregnant things got really bad 'cause I was uneducated and I did not know how to deal with life. Teach the children how to be children. And he beat me and I put up with it for four years until he beats my kid and then I started kicking him out. And all my friends were still in school and they are going to their prom and I am sitting at home with two kids you know. God I wish I was still in school, seeing all my friends." Ketchikan, 17 year old

"I just want to mention this one thing too. Having a job is almost the same thing as school. You have to do it whether you like it or not. The only difference is you're supporting yourself if you have a job, and you have to do it everyday. You just can't say well I am not going to do this today. And if you can't plan yourself in school how are you going to discipline yourself when you have a job?" Ketchikan, 16 year old

"Well if she was pregnant I would ask her if she is ready for the responsibility because I know what it is like to have your child taken... Second, if it is a problem at home there is an easy way to solve that. Go right down to the police station and talk to one of them guys. Now if the problem is at school, go to your principal or a counselor. And if it's none of them that's bothering you and you just want to do it (drop out) for kicks, the kicks ain't that funny because when you drop out of school, then automatically your parents are going to get all rallied up and then you are going to run away... But you could be out on the street selling yourself, using drugs. One of my girlfriends, when I got kicked out of school she did too, and she killed herself because she couldn't handle the stress of life. I am not saying, you know, give up your child or have an abortion. What I am trying to say is, try to make it work, try to find the programs. Because see I didn't know nothing about the programs, all I knew was that I was sleeping behind a garbage can and I didn't like it." Ketchikan, 17 year old

"Just simply it is just no picnic...I would explain, you know, I have been on the outside and I know how difficult it is. I can't find a job..." Ketchikan, 16 year old

"I wish I would have stayed in school because I miss it." Ketchikan, 16 year old

"Education is the most important thing in life." Nome, 17 year old

"(If she dropped out) she wouldn't be able to go on and her dreams would be taken away from her." Seward, 19 year old

TO TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS AND COUNSELORS

"They don't really see your personal life, they just figure, well she is doing okay, she is doing okay. Just like they say about the kids that commit suicide. 'Well, I thought she was fine, I thought there was nothing wrong.' You know, I didn't even know my counselor 'till I dropped out of school. I didn't even know there was a counselor in school. They don't care about the one that is sitting there, not turning work in on time, they should actually." Anchorage, 17 year old

"...what he (the principal who expelled her) couldn't see in me was depression. That is the only thing that really did stop me from school was depression and if I had a chance and I was his principal and he was a girl I would look at him and ask him if he would like to go to night school because I didn't know at the time that was available to me." Ketchikan, 18 year old

"Care." Anchorage, 13 year old

"Reach out to the kids having a hard time. Don't only pay attention to kids doing good work." Anchorage, 18 year old

"I think teachers should care more. You have some but a lot of them don't." Anchorage, 17 year old

"I would like them (teachers) to be closer. Like in public schools, they choose the students that they want to get closer to. They won't leave it open and be friendly with all students. You know what I am saying." Anchorage, 18 year old

"I am going to (stay in alternative school) because of the teachers, they need to be nicer (at the public school) and not judging people and getting against them." Nome, 17 year old

"I don't think they really realize that the kids in this age, you call it, have a lot more problems, and a lot more kids are on the street and not a home, a lot of them support themselves. A lot of kids are working. They just don't understand that we can't be going to school all day and work." Anchorage, 17 year old

"I can't say it on the tape."
("You can't put it nicely?")
"No, I can't." Nome, 17 year old

"...they should give us a chance out there. They are suppose to teach us something, not get mad at us." Anchorage, 17 year old

"What do you call that word, I forgot. It starts with a D... Like when teachers put you down it lowers your self-esteem, you feel like, you feel bad, and it feels like you don't want to got to school anymore." Anchorage, 17 year old

VI. THREE PERSONAL STORIES

The following narratives are excerpted from the stories three young women told about their lives. The names have been changed.

JENNY

When I was first born, my dad lived in California state penitentiary for the first two years of my life. My dad has always been a jerk, I can remember that. (Laughs) My dad was always a jerk. Uhm. Him and my mom fought all of the time. I can remember them fighting all the time. Even when I was little, I can remember leaving the house and just walking around the block for a little bit because I hated it when they fought.

I can remember that he used to physically abuse me. It wasn't anything really bad like beating the crap out of me or anything, but he would pull my hair and kick me. Then, when I was six years old, well, that is the first I can remember of my grandpa sexually abusing me until I was twelve. Then I finally told someone at school, but nothing happened because my mom said she didn't want to cause anymore problems so we just dropped it, and I never pressed charges or anything.

That's all I can really remember. I can remember not ever going to school. And my parents were real strict. My dad he was a real jerk about things. He, I couldn't talk on the phone, and I couldn't talk with anyone older than me at all.

When I was thirteen that's when I first started doing all of my drugs. I found them. I was looking in my mom and dad's closet at the Christmas presents trying to see what I got and I found all kinds of drugs in my dad's closet. And that's the first that I knew that my dad dealt drugs. And then, I just stole, I didn't do any of the pills because I wasn't really too sure about them, or what they were, but I took all his pot all the time and smoked it.

(How do you picture your life five years from now?)

Very lonely. Well, no, I'd have James (her boyfriend). Five years from now I think my two brothers will be dead, and my mother will be on the verge of death.

Five years from now I am going to be 21 and I want to be in college actually studying to be in the social field. And I want to come back up here and work one of these days at an alternative school. I either want to be in Seattle or California. I am going to have a house. Oh, when I am going to college, I am going to have another job. I don't know what yet, I haven't decided, and I am going to be a volunteer, like maybe... then I am going to have a nice house. I don't think I will be married or anything at that time. Not until after I get through college. Oh, and I want horses, I love horses. I think that's all.

MELISSA

Let's see, when I was ... I barely remember my dad. He died when I was like two years old. But, uhm, I was in the village with a population of 100.

My mom was a very bad alcoholic. I had to take care of my brothers all of the time, so I never went to school. Finally, the State took me away when I was like 9 years old, and I went back to the village to live with my aunt, my mom's sister, and oh, I hated it. It was like here, like jail. And I, that's when I really started liking school because I, they had six little kids that I had to watch. I had no time to myself. School was a way to get away from the little kids.

I really hated living there. I would always try, like try to kill myself, to get away from it, but it never helped. Then one day, I just, I don't know, I got mad, I packed my stuff and left, and I went across the street and moved in with my other aunt. And they were bad alcoholics too. But they were really nice.

I still like school. I went to school everyday. They never bothered me when they drink because they were proud of me, I guess. They were proud of me that I was going to school and their sons, my cousins, never went to school, and they never accomplished anything. And I was the only girl that was in sports, and it was fun.

It was fun until I was introduced to alcohol. That was when I was, like, 13. I got introduced to alcohol. And everything changed. They treated me more like I was older, you know?

I moved in and out of my uncle's house and my aunt's. One time, my uncle, and my aunt were both drinking, and I wanted to leave. I wanted to go back to my mom in our village. I started packing my stuff, and my uncle came out with a shotgun and said,"You can't leave me, you're our daughter now." He didn't want me to leave, and he took the shotgun and I ran out of the house. Then he shot. I ran to my other uncle. He shot, but he missed us. He was drunk and he shot like five shots and I was still okay.

I was always a good student though, throughout my school years I was good until I came here to Anchorage. I just finally dropped out of school and they asked me if I wanted to go to SAVE II. And I thought, it sounded like a good program, and I thought, okay, I could graduate. And I went there and I stayed there for a week and I don't know, I just didn't continue.

I really regret it now. I mean, it's like, huh, I'm a senior with no credits this year. It really makes me feel low. And right now, I am working on my GED. It's all right, but it's like, I still wish I got my high school diploma. I just can't wait to get my GED done. At least I will accomplish something. It'll make me feel good.

In five years I'll be 23 and I picture myself typing at some business, big business, answering phones and getting paid good money, coming home to a house. And have a whole wardrobe that is just right. You know? 365 outfits, man, one for every day of the year.

My mom, I don't know, she just started drinking again, so she is slowly killing herself that way, but I'm planning that she will still be alive, maybe. My brothers will still be alive. They might come stay with me from the village whenever they want.

KATHY

From years one to six, it was basic; I just got abused the first six years of my life. Nothing really, I just got beat for the first six years of my life.

Then I was adopted when I was six years old. I really didn't like my (adopted) mom at all, because it was a new everything to me, and I thought I was just going into the same scene that I had just gone through, so I didn't trust anybody.

I never really went to school. I just stayed home and then as I got older, I started trusting more, a little bit, very little though. My mom would get me into Girl Scouts and things like that so that I could get in the crowd more.

Uhm, there's not really much to say. My parents would try to do their best for me. They wanted to give me everything, they'd give me materialistic things, and everything like that, and then I would take it. But as I got older, that was not what I wanted. I wanted love.

I wanted love, but then again, I didn't accept it when they tried to give it to me. When they tried to hug me or anything, I wouldn't accept it, but that's what I wanted. So, soon, my parents started getting the idea that when they hugged me and I wouldn't accept, they just kind of turned their back to me and say, "Okay, if she doesn't want it, you know, we won't, we won't go hug her anymore. If she wants it, she can come to us."

So then I, I drifted in my family. You know I was the drifter. I wasn't real, I was there physically, but mentally I wasn't there. I was always in my room by myself listening to my radio, or writing, or sorting out my room, or rearranging it. I was never really there. So then at about age 15, I started f--- up, I said, "I can't handle this." I didn't like my parents anymore, I never liked my parents. I hate living in families, I would just rather be by myself.

For me, one of my issues was my abuse. I had to talk about my abuse with my parents, because they adopted me and they wanted me to recognize it and look at it. They think that's why I stayed out of the family most of the time. They gave me everything I wanted, and physically I was there, but mentally, the love and all that wasn't there.

Finally one day they just threw the papers at me and told me to read them. That shocked me. I found out what all happened to me when I was young when I didn't even know what was going on. I read things that they said in court and how much they had to pay to get me, and things that happened to me. I was shocked.

When I finally went over to the high school I just kind of went off into my own world. I didn't like hanging around with a lot of people. I ended up, before school was out, I ended up dropping out and I never showed back up for school. We had gone to Seward one weekend and I came back, and I just never showed up for school again after that. I was 14 and 15.

I never liked school. The teachers put me in stupid math class. I was taking like a 7th grade level math and I was supposed to be taking this algebra. They had tested me on it and I had tested really high on it, but they still put me in stupid math. They had me in really dumb English classes too.

All the teachers that my counselor had given me were hard case on the troublemakers. I never really caused any of them that much harm.

I can't just sit there and say my feelings. Or I have to hide my head like I don't want to face it. I feel that here (at the alternative school) I've gotten, it's changed me.

I want to have a good job. I don't know what I want to do yet. I mean, something. I want to be like, taking night courses. Oh yeah, I am going to write a book on the side too.

I want to, I don't know, I've always wanted to research cancer because my grandma died from it. I've always been curious so maybe something like that. Or, you know, something besides chemotherapy. Or, I don't know, I want either that or interior design because I like decorating things. I just like decorate the crap out of my room.

VII. APPENDICES

GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me your name and a little about yourself, for example, your age and something you do well.
2. What was hard for you about high school and what was easy?
3. What is your story about leaving school? Tell what led up to leaving, what leaving was like, what experiences followed your dropping out, how you arrived at your present situation.
4. During your school years, was there anyone at school who was a support to you?
5. Was there anyone at home who was a support to you?
6. Think back to what was hard for you at school. Can you think of anything which, if it had been different, might have helped you stay in school?
7. Think back to what was hard for you at home. Can you think of anything which, if it had been different, might have helped you stay in school?
8. What, if anything, needs to be changed in order for schools to better encourage young women to remain in school?
9. If a friend or sister of yours were thinking of quitting school, what would you want her to know?
10. If you could say anything you wanted to teachers, counselors, administrators or other adults, what would you want to say?

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